



Fig. 1. Bernardo Strozzi, *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, 78.9 x 99.4 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Sir David Wilkie, after Adriaen van Ostade, *The Village School*, ca. 1800–1803, oil on paper, 25.8 x 21.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Théophile Hamel, after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Education of the Virgin*, ca. 1845–1846, oil on canvas, 43.5 x 36 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Rise and Stand Up: Renditions of Education in Art

Camille Devaux

This essay examines the representation of different forms of education in three paintings spanning the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and how each image was influenced by the socio-political and religious contexts in which it was produced. The earliest work, *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria* (1635) (fig. 1) by Bernardo Strozzi (ca. 1581–1644), represents the advanced level of scientific education that boys received from elders in ancient Greece. By contrast, *The Village School* (ca. 1800–1803) (fig. 2) by Sir David Wilkie (1785–1841) presents the rudimentary teaching methods of a teacher struggling to educate a handful of disorganized village children. Finally, *The Education of the Virgin* (1845–1846) (fig. 3) by Théophile Hamel (1817–1870) depicts the transfer of knowledge from mother to daughter. A comparative analysis will reveal some of the ways in which the significance and purpose of education have historically been understood.

Strozzi's *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria* represents the transfer of scientific knowledge from one generation to another.



Fig. 1. Bernardo Strozzi, *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, 78.9 x 99.4 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Eratosthenes (ca. 276–ca. 194 BCE), the teacher on the left, was a Greek scholar who is known as the “father of geography.” Using rudimentary geometric principles, he calculated with remarkable precision the circumference of the earth.¹ He is seen here teaching a young and enthusiastic student, surrounded by teaching aids such as a globe and a large book. The Baroque style of the painting is evident in its dramatic use of light and forms. The contrast between the dark shadows and zones of light directs the viewer’s focus towards the actions of the two individuals in the scene. The bright light shining on Eratosthenes’s hands directs the viewer’s gaze towards the book to which he is pointing—a symbol of knowledge. The viewer’s eye is then guided to the youth’s hands, firmly placed over a globe of the constellations, indicated by the animal figures on its surface. Light also comes into play as the warm and luminous fingers of this young boy stand out against the dull yellow tone of the sphere. A thin, white line represents the reflective surface of the compass in the boy’s left hand. The excitement of this one-on-one exchange on geography is palpable, with the figures’ hair rendered in a manner suggesting movement. The furrowed brows of both men, due to their concentration on the task at hand, further add to the sense of drama inherent in Baroque art.

Strozzi’s choice of subject matter reflects his complicated relationship to religion. After receiving his artistic training, he entered a Capuchin monastery, where he produced devotional paintings influenced by Franciscan teachings. He left the monastery after a decade to care for his ill mother and unmarried sister, and financially supported them by selling religious works.² After his mother passed away, Strozzi left Genoa for Venice to evade orders to return to the monastery.³ Nevertheless, he continued to paint both religious and secular subjects. *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria* was painted at a time when the Catholic Church was actively suppressing scientific research. In 1633, two years prior to this work’s

creation, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) was convicted of heresy by the Roman Inquisition for advancing the theory that the planets revolve around the sun at the centre of the solar system. Eratosthenes, too, faced opposition from the Church on account of his research on the spherical shape of the earth.⁴ Strozzi's painting of Eratosthenes teaching a student suggests that he disapproved of the Church's opposition to scientific progress.⁵

The thrill of learning that Strozzi has masterfully captured in *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria* reflects a rich period of scientific discovery. The title of the work also refers to the library of Alexandria, which was a vital centre of knowledge and discussion of the ancient world. Alexander the Great's (356–323 BCE) founding of Alexandria—a port city in Egypt—in 331 BCE enabled the Greek empire to obtain important scientific and cultural objects, such as scrolls, by confiscating them from ships entering the Alexandrian port. These items, most of which contained Greek text,⁶ made up the library's collection.⁷ On the one hand, *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria* raises questions about the socio-political implications of imperial conquests; on the other hand, it illustrates the extensive knowledge gained by the victors.

Strozzi's depiction of a pioneer of geography educating a student in the rich cultural centre of Alexandria differs dramatically from Wilkie's *The Village School*, an oil sketch copy of a painting originally produced by Dutch Golden Age artist Adriaen van Ostade (1610–1685). Based in Haarlem, in the northwest Netherlands, throughout his life, van Ostade primarily painted scenes of village life, such as taverns and domestic interiors.⁸ Strongly influenced by van Ostade and other seventeenth-century Netherlandish artists,⁹ Wilkie was a Scottish painter who often depicted rural villages or crowded interiors with middle- to lower-class groups of individuals. Belonging to the tradition of Dutch genre paintings, *The Village School*

depicts an educator trying his best to teach a large group of village children to read and write. Working-class life and the education of children are common subjects in genre works.¹⁰ The messy and old interior of the school is greatly accentuated by Wilkie's broad and frank brushwork, which characterizes his later style. The children are scattered in small groups, busying themselves with various activities such as reading books, seen on the bottom right, and consulting the teacher. The varying ages of the children—there is an infant sitting on the floor next to the teacher's desk, and a much older boy standing to its left—and the deteriorating building suggest a rudimentary form of schooling. A large portion of the image is devoted to the roof of the building. Its uneven and crumbling wooden beams enhance the realism of the scene, capturing the actual conditions of many Sunday schools at the turn of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 2. Sir David Wilkie, after Adriaen van Ostade, *The Village School*, ca. 1800–1803, oil on paper, 25.8 x 21.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The Village School depicts elementary school education, which was not regarded as essential in the nineteenth century as it is in Western society today. Families living in the country often worked together to make the most out of each season and to yield a plentiful harvest. Everyone, from the eldest to the youngest, had to lend a hand. Child labour was common not only in rural settings but also in urban factories, meaning that children often did not have time to attend school. During this era, compulsory education for youth was still a burgeoning idea. Decades after Wilkie painted *The Village School*, the United Kingdom's Education Act of 1876 merely suggested that compulsory schooling could reduce child labour and be beneficial to child development.¹¹ This painting provides a glimpse into the situation of most families of the lower classes, whose status and poverty did not let them attend more prestigious schools. At the turn of the nineteenth century, when *The Village School* was made, many children still could not afford to spend time at school. Busy either in the fields or in factories, they could only attend Sunday school. Robert Raikes (1736–1811), who initiated the Sunday school movement in 1780, promoted education on the only day that hard-working child labourers could rest.¹² Although the main teachings were religious, Sunday school fostered reading and basic writing skills among the religious and non-religious alike. A *Telegraph* article celebrating the bicentenary of Raikes's death states that over three million children attending this type of school were non-believers.¹³ Wilkie's *The Village School* captures the revolutionary changes that the Sunday school movement brought to education. Depicting a mass of excited children eager to learn and spend time with their comrades in a room likely borrowed for the occasion, Wilkie's painting reminds us that the enterprise of a few individuals like Raikes made a difference in the education of many generations.

The relationship between religion and education is also the subject of Hamel's *The Education of the Virgin*, in which the Virgin Mary is being taught the scriptures by her mother, Saint

Anne. Behind them, Mary's father, Joachim, is looking over while *putti* fly in from the top right corner. This family portrait gives us insight into the earliest type of formal education in which the scriptures were the most important readings. However, the main focus is the relationship between a mother and her daughter. This scene does not originate from official biblical texts, but is nonetheless often depicted in Marian imagery.¹⁴ The Gospel of James, which details the birth and life of Mary, mentions her education in the temple, where her parents left her at a very young age, and where she stayed until she married Joseph. As the text says: "And the child was two years old, and Joachim said: Let us take her up to the temple of the Lord [...] And Anna said: Let us wait for the third year, in order that the child may not seek for father or mother."¹⁵ Pamela Sheingorn, a medieval historian specializing in women's history, theorizes that the popular image of Saint Anne teaching the Virgin Mary was the result of a devotional enterprise to give Saint Anne credit as Mary's educational figure, despite a lack of evidence to support this claim.¹⁶ Whereas the temple offered regular education to children in large groups, Saint Anne was often represented as the primary source of Mary's literacy, intelligence and competence as Christ's mother.



Fig. 3. Théophile Hamel, after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Education of the Virgin*, ca. 1845–1846, oil on canvas, 43.5 x 36 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Hamel painted *The Education of the Virgin* after Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) during Quebec’s movement in the 1840s to establish a school system across the province.¹⁷ Hamel was drawn to this subject for many reasons, one of which was his religious upbringing. The painter was born in Sainte-Foy, Québec, at a time when the clergy still had a great influence on the daily lives of citizens. The Church was in charge of education and hospital care until the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, as patriotism started to blossom, French Canadian leaders sought to transform the mostly illiterate population into one that was educated, knowledgeable and trained.¹⁸ Education had to be secularized and more focused on creating fully capable and politicized citizens in order to outwit the loyalists, who wished to remain under the control of the monarchy.¹⁹ Hamel’s encounter with Rubens’s *The Education of the Virgin* (1625– 1626) in Antwerp was undoubtedly affected by the debate on whether education in Quebec should be managed by the Church or the government, and by the constant rivalry between the loyalists and the patriots back home. Whereas French-Canadian society was taking a secular turn, Hamel remained closely tied to the clergy, to which many of his patrons belonged.²⁰ In copying Rubens’s depiction of religious education, Hamel refers to the dilemmas that later gave way to a secular mode of education in Quebec.

This essay has examined three distinctive representations of education within their historical contexts. The depiction of an ancient Greek scientist and philosopher sharing his knowledge with a younger boy in *Eratosthenes Teaching in Alexandria* relates to Strozzi’s past as a clergyman and his relative detachment from it. Wilkie’s copy of a painting by van Ostade depicting a classroom in a village setting reflects advances in educational reform at a time when children worked instead of receiving a formal education. This kind of relatively basic education, literacy, is the subject of Hamel’s *The Education of the Virgin*. The artist’s decision to reproduce Rubens’s painting may have been influenced by the ambitions of

French Canadian leaders to create a new generation that was better educated, and a society in which education and religion remained separate. Reflective of their time and culture, these paintings demonstrate the evolving relationship between religion and education in Western society.

NOTES

¹ Michael Pidwirny, "Introduction to Geography," *Physical Geography*, last modified June 5, 2009, <http://www.physicalgeography.net/fundamentals/1a.html>.

² "Bernardo Strozzi," The J. Paul Getty Museum, accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/910/bernardo-strozzi-italian-1581-1644/>.

³ "Bernardo Strozzi," BBC, accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/artists/bernardo-strozzi>.

⁴ Mirjana Božić and Martial Ducloy, "Eratosthenes' Teachings with a Globe in a School Yard," *Physics Education* 43 no. 2 (March 2008): 166–67, <http://www.zvonkomaric.com/download/Bozic2.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶ Joshua J. Mark, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, "Alexandria," accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.ancient.eu/alexandria/>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685)," Rijksmuseum, accessed January 11, 2016, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/explore-the-collection/overview/adriaen-van-ostade>.

⁹ Nicholas Tromans, *David Wilkie: The People's Painter* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 68.

¹⁰ Jennifer Meagher, "Genre Painting in Northern Europe," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), last modified April 2008, accessed December 18, 2015, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gnrn/hd_gnrn.htm.

¹¹ "The 1870 Education Act," UK Parliament, accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/>.

¹² "A Brief History of the Sunday School Movement," Sunday School Library Collection, accessed December 9, 2015, <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/sunday/hist1.htm>.

¹³ Anonymous, April 9, 2011 (7:25 a.m.), comment on Christopher Howse, "School on Sunday for Five Million," *Telegraph*, April 9, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/8454784/School-on-Sunday-for-five-million.html>.

¹⁴ Pamela Sheingorn, "'The Wise Mother': The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary," *Gesta* 32, no. 1 (1993): 70–71, doi:10.2307/767018.

¹⁵ "The Protoevangelium of James," New Advent, last modified 2009, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm>.

¹⁶ Sheingorn, 70.

¹⁷ Chad Gaffield, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, "History of Education," accessed December 18, 2015, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/history-of-education/>.

¹⁸ Fernand Ouellet, "L'enseignement primaire □: responsabilité des Églises ou de l'État? (1801-1836)," *Recherches sociographiques* 2, no. 2 (1961): 171, doi:10.7202/055077ar.

¹⁹ David Montpetit, “La loi des écoles de syndics ou de l’Assemblée (1827),” accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.1837.qc.ca/1837.pl?out=article&pno=n204>.

²⁰ Raymond Vézina, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, “Théophile Hamel,” accessed December 9, 2015, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/theophile-hamel/>.

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